

## FILM

### No Longer Home Movies

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By THOMAS DOHERTY

The most famous motion-picture credit of the last century belongs not to a brilliant Hollywood director or a heroic newsreel cameraman, but to a rank amateur who could barely hold steady his 8-millimeter camera but who, on November 22, 1963, at 12:30 p.m. CST, in Dallas, happened to be standing at the right intersection for a collision with history.

Abraham Zapruder's home movie of the Kennedy assassination is the supreme example of the serendipitous transformation of ordinary imagery into hypnotic history. But what about the other reels in Zapruder's *oeuvre* -- and the home movies of countless other shutterbugs who recorded the quotidian passages of their own lives without being interrupted by a news bulletin?

Until recently the answer was simple: Who cares? Home movies were shunned by archivists and audiences alike as an ordeal to be endured with forced smiles and gritted teeth, a torture rack of weddings and vacations, dance recitals and school plays, barbecues and bar mitzvahs. But now, a century after the movies turned pro, amateurs are finally getting featured billing in the work of motion-picture archivists and documentary filmmakers, the two wings of cinema studies with a vested interest in the raw material of history on film. Through events like Home Movie Day, observed in August around the world, cinephiles are celebrating home movies for the very qualities that once made eyes glaze over and posteriors squirm -- their privileged access to the mundane folkways of mankind, captured without the intrusion of a busybody ethnographer or the conceits of commercial journalism.

Like most film categories, the definition of home movies is open-ended and frays around the edges, but the subject matter tends to be intrafamilial, the person filming to work a day job outside the studio gates, and the size of the film gauge to be smaller than the big-screen, Hollywood standard of 35 millimeter (home movies are usually shot in 16 millimeter, 8 millimeter, or Super 8 millimeter). A few purists insist that the term "home movies" be reserved for celluloid imagery, but most collectors and critics welcome video

and digital recording, even Webcasting, into the fold.

However defined, the practice of home moviemaking can claim a long lineage. Though the earliest motion-picture equipment was too cumbersome and complex to entice the weekend dabbler, by 1923 Kodak and Bell & Howell had each developed a hand-held, user-friendly 16-millimeter camera. In 1932 Kodak devised a durable 8-millimeter model that soon became standard issue for the self-appointed camera jockeys who seemed to be issued one per kinship network. With the introduction of idiot-proof Super 8 millimeter in the 1960s and lightweight videocams in the 1970s, the means of motion-picture production were firmly in the hands of the people.

Still, home movies floated under the radar of the government librarians and museum curators serving as the official keepers of the frames. After 1935, when the highbrow British film critic Iris Barry built the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library as a temple to the greatest hits of D.W. Griffith and Eric von Stroheim, motion-picture archivists enforced a rigid hierarchy separating artist from amateur. Eventually many archives loosened up admissions policies, but 35 millimeter was the main criterion for preservation and circulation -- and understandably so. With so many acknowledged classics awaiting rescue and restoration, the notion of squandering meager budgets and precious storage space on Junior's Little League exploits seemed like a waste of vital resources.

In the 1990s, however, agitators within the Association of Moving Image Archivists began urging the group to lower its sights, gauge-wise. In June 2000 a tipping point occurred when archivists from the Library of Congress's National Film Preservation Board and the association met for a two-day confab to mull small-gauge issues and the equally daunting challenges posed by videotape and digital recording. The next year film archivists highlighted the topic at their annual convention, and since then they've been eager to take a second -- or first -- look at home-movie donations. As Dwight Swanson, a dedicated home-movie archivist, told me: "It speaks volumes just seeing what people chose to film, as it shows us what they felt were the important and memorable (or at least photogenic) moments in their lives."

The open-mindedness toward home video has been part of a wider, counter-canonical trend to preserve and analyze "ephemeral films" -- an umbrella term for industrial and educational films, public-service announcements, and the like. Led by the veteran scavenger hunter Rick Prelinger, filmmakers and archivists have shown, for example, that driver-education films from the 1950s can be as instructive about gender dynamics as about parallel parking. With the once ephemeral now essential, the archival embrace of home movies has logically extended to the smallest possible unit of film production: the ruggedly independent citizen-cinematographer. In that sense, collecting home movies is the archival equivalent of from-the-bottom-up history.

Once granted space at the archival inn, however, home movies pose a unique set of problems. The repair work on battered footage and material shot in obsolete film gauges requires exotic expertise and antique equipment. Most troubling is the harsh duty of cinematic euthanasia. Agonizing decisions come with the territory, but the family-photo-album quality of home movies makes the triage especially wrenching: Keep this life, toss that life. "How is an archivist to make the selection, when virtually everyone's father, uncle, or grandmother shoots films of the kids?" Jan-Christopher Horak, founding editor of the journal *The Moving Image*, asked me.

Unlike the archivists dutifully suffering the headaches attendant to home-movie preservation, film scholars have thus far expended scant intellectual capital mulling the meanings of the lower film gauges. With notable exceptions -- for example, Patricia R. Zimmermann's *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Indiana University Press, 1995) and Michelle Citron's *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) -- the critical cadre still prefers to focus on the work of the name-brand masters. As Dan Streible, film-reviews editor for *The Moving Image*, conceded to me, "The lack of attention to home movies in documentary-film books is a big gap in the theory, history, and knowledge of documentary film." Streible adds, "That's changing, but slowly."

If the cinema-studies mill has yet to churn, documentary filmmakers themselves are taking up the slack, digging into home movies the way they once pillaged the newsreel record. The

attraction is obvious. In a media landscape overrun with rerun imagery, home movies offer fresh pickings. Moreover, the crosscutting between oft-seen newsreel and network material and heretofore-unseen private caches acts as an instant critique of the official version of history.

In no small way, the injection of energy from home movies has fueled the continuing renaissance in documentary filmmaking. These days, it is a rare bio-doc or archival compilation that fails to blow up home-movie snapshots for big-screen projection, a technique milked in heartstring-pulling memoirs such as Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect: A Son's Journey* (2003), a portrait of his remote, inscrutable father, the brilliant architect Louis Kahn, and Mark Wexler's *Tell Them Who You Are* (2004), a portrait of his remote, cantankerous father, the brilliant cinematographer Haskell Wexler. In *Bright Leaves* (2003), the motion-picture memoirist Ross McElwee takes a more good-natured approach as he mines his home-movie past and present-day road trips for a hybrid genre that is equal parts rigorous documentary and shaggy-dog home movie. Already a consistent aesthetic has emerged. Super 8 millimeter is favored for ceremonial occasions, with the cast of family characters more rehearsed and self-conscious, while the less obtrusive videocamera captures (or incites) a more confessional and confrontational kind of family drama.

Probably the most elaborate -- certainly the creepiest -- of the home-movie-dependent documentaries is Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), an inquiry into the domestic travails and legal trials of an exhaustively self-documented family from Long Island. Drawing on a mammoth cache of home movies, video diaries, and surreptitious audio recordings taken by the Friedmans, Jarecki peeks into the family photo album to look at the darkest back pages of the suburban idyll of birthday parties, beach outings, and family playlets.

As with other documentary genres, home movies raise vexing questions about the boundary lines between the staged and spontaneous, private stash and public spectacle. Presumably, whether indie, experimental, or underground, filmmakers with expectations of a public screening beyond their immediate blood relatives possess an artistic self-consciousness that the home-movie maven cooing over the kids lacks. But hard distinctions

between the playhouse and the household break down quicker than an old Bell & Howell projector. *Tarnation* (2003), the filmmaker Jonathan Caouette's extraordinary portrait of his schizophrenic mother and gay Texas boyhood, is drawn from nearly two decades of home movies and video diaries. At some point (maybe when the precocious lad hits puberty), the footage morphs from amateur film into avant-garde performance piece.

Little wonder, then, that the civilians are mounting pictures for their own exhibitions. Established in 2003, Home Movie Day allows backyard auteurs to screen their highlight reels during a daylong festival at local movie houses. Of course, moviemakers with their sights on Home Movie Day may not be making real home movies.

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